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ABSTRACT

With the increasing curricular demands on teachers, many educators wonder if students find adequate opportunities to think. While visiting educators and students in Franklin County, Tennessee, a college instructor discovered a successful program designed to help students think in meaningful ways about their lives. The contest, established by Sir John Templeton, encourages students to contemplate those universal truths that transcend modern times or particular cultures. Templeton himself has written 3 books that identify and explain these universal truths or moral principles while drawing from a rich pool of quotations which include Aesop, Emerson, Jesus, Buddha, Aristotle, and Confucius. In Franklin County, the essay program exists in 5 junior and senior high schools. Two contests are held each year. Using guidelines set by Templeton, teachers designed the program, and get together periodically to make improvements. An employee screens the 800-900 essays, and judges rank the 50 or so entries that they receive. The criteria for evaluating winning essays emphasize content over presentation and mechanics. Teachers introduce the program by reading and discussing winning essays, using the essays as a springboard to discuss values and desirable principles, such as honesty and respect. A 10th-grade teacher views the Laws of Life program as a way to help students get in touch with their feelings. English teachers, however, approach the essay assignment differently. Some give little or no preparation, whereas others implement the steps in the writing process and encourage students to find their writing voices. It is concluded that in whatever way the contest is implemented, the program's basic tenets relate directly to current theory about the need for connecting thinking with reading and writing to maintain a free society. (Contains 12 references.) (TB)

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The Templeton Laws of Life Contest: Opportunities for Reading, Thinking, and Writing

With the ever-increasing curricular demands on teachers, many of us wonder if students find adequate opportunities to *think*. Tama (1989b) says we want to educate students to become citizens who base their decisions and choices on careful, critical thinking; in fact, maintaining our freedom of choice depends on the ability to think clearly.

How, then, can we enable students to think? We do this by making them aware of authentic situations that require problem solving, higher-order thinking skills, and analysis of their own life experiences. We challenge their minds. Such thinking flourishes in a climate of reading, writing, and discussing (Tama, 1989a). In order for students to improve from ordinary to good thinkers, they need to identify and give good reasons for their opinions (Matthew Lipman, 1988). Thus, weaving strands of reading, discussing, writing, and thinking into the curriculum gives students opportunities to explore and form ideas that will guide them throughout their lives. Our schools need programs that do this.

To take root, thinking must be verbalized--first internally, then with others. When students share their ideas, they use the feedback to reflect, refine, and perhaps redirect their thoughts. This talking through provides what Donald Graves refers to as *rehearsal* for writers (Graves, 1994a). As students listen to what others say, they find new perspectives and differing points

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of view that may impact their own thinking. And as they read what others have written--be it the writings of their peers or the writings of professional authors--they gain further insight into their own beliefs and values.

During the thinking process, students are likely to move from discussion and reading into writing. Calkins says, "Writing is a powerful tool for thinking, because when we write, we fasten thoughts, observations, and feelings onto paper" (1991, p. 56). Writing helps students affirm, reinforce, and clarify vague thoughts by causing them to focus on what they truly believe. Thinking moves to deeper levels as writers revise, seeking the exact word or phrase, or the right shade of meaning, to bring clarity to thought. "Thinking through the medium of writing," said Donald Graves (1994b), "is necessary for a free society."

To effectively communicate their thoughts to others, writers need to find their *voice*; that is, they need to give the illusion of speaking directly to the reader (Clark, 1987). Graves (1994a) calls voice the driving force of the writing process, the imprint of ourselves on our writing. He claims that it underlies every part of the process. Without voice, writing is lifeless.

Referring to how a writing program can benefit students, Newkirk (1985, p. 119) says that it "can help in the building of bridges--by encouraging them to stand back and look at their own thinking, by encouraging them to explore the motivations, perceptions, and feelings of others. . . ." Neilsen (1989) urges

teachers to involve students in consequential contexts for learning, and Tama (1989b) points out that many teachers are promoting good thinking in their classrooms, often by assigning tasks that focus on an issue or a problem. We need rituals in our hurried day-to-day existence that let us pause and make meaning of the bits and pieces of our lives (Calkins, 1991).

Overview of Laws of Life Program

As I visited with educators and students in Franklin County, Tennessee, I found that students there have a "ritual" that enables them to express their beliefs and values in writing. Through the Templeton Laws of Life essay contest, English teachers invite, and sometimes require, students to consider the principles or laws that guide their lives and to present them in essay form.

Sir John Templeton established the program in order to encourage students to contemplate the Laws of Life, those universal truths that transcend modern times or particular cultures. The ultimate value of the program is to encourage students to think and write about those laws and moral principles that they consider important for their own lives. Templeton also believes that the program can positively impact the core values of school systems.

In support of these beliefs, Templeton has written three books that identify and explain these laws. Unbiased by any particular point of view, the working list of Laws of Life

consists of hundreds of quotations from such culturally diverse individuals as Aesop, Ghandi, Emerson, Jesus, Buddha, Aristotle, Confucius, and Franklin. It is divided into 23 categories, including integrity, wisdom, perseverance, and responsibility. Although students are not limited to these laws, they may use them as a starting point. Examples include "Honesty is the first chapter in the book of wisdom" (Thomas Jefferson), "Man is what he believes" (Anton Chekov), and "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration" (Thomas Jefferson).

Currently, this program exists only in five junior (grades 7-9) and senior (grades 10-12) high schools in Franklin County, Tennessee. Two contests are held each year, although most students participate in only one of these. Each school has at least one winner, and teachers of participating students are also eligible for awards. A paid employee screens the 800-900 essays, and judges rank the 50 or so entries that they receive.

The criteria for evaluating winning essays emphasize content over presentation and mechanics. Judges are first asked to consider if the law is valid and would make the world a better place if everyone practiced it. The law should also demonstrate respect for others and have universal appeal. A significant criterion for presentation is how compelling, persuasive, or moving the essay is. Also important are clarity and flow (does one thought flow into the next?) and of less importance are grammar, spelling, and neatness. This focus is perhaps best exemplified by a special education student who won honorable

mention for his emotionally charged essay about his grandfather which began, "My pop learned me a lot about life."

Using the guidelines set by Templeton, teachers designed the program, and they periodically get together to decide how to apportion the money and make improvements. The program has full adminstrative support, with principals believing winning entries bring prestige to their schools. Parents are often directly involved when their children discuss their essays, and, along with community members, may serve as volunteers, attend the banquet that honors teachers and winning students, and read selected essays published in the local newspaper.

Thinking, Discussing, and Reading

In talking with teachers, I find that most introduce the program by reading and discussing winning essays. They use these essays as a springboard to discuss values and desirable characteristics, such as honesty and respect.

Darnell Day, a twelfth grade teacher, discusses important issues, then may put some terms on the board (i.e., trust or loyalty) and ask students to write about them. She asks, for example: "How is honesty important in your life? How is it important for your family? Where would we be without honesty? What qualities do you want to see in your parents, in your community leaders?" She may also use a quotation from a Templeton book as a stimulus for writing. When students finish the discussion and the writing activities, they can usually say, "This is what I want people to see in me."

Debbie Smith, an eighth grade teacher, believes that junior high teachers must work harder to prepare students than high school teachers in order to lay the groundwork. Since many of the same students enter the contest at each grade level, they build on their prior understandings as they progress through the grades. Debbie spends a great deal of time discussing the laws; in fact, she must first clarify that "law" in this case means "rule" to avoid confusion over the meaning. To guide students' thinking, Debbie asks, "If you were to die today, what are some of the positive things you would want others to think about you?"

As a tenth grade teacher, Janice Collins views the Laws of Life program as a way to help students get in touch with their feelings. Janice encourages her students to write about someone or something that has made a difference in their lives. She asks, "Who has been important to you? Why is that person special? What does that person mean to you?" Some of her students respond by writing what they cannot tell orally: about abuse, death, and family tragedies. By doing so, they release their feelings and help her understand their problems and needs.

Teachers also encourage students to read in order to get ideas. Darnell asks her students to read the newspaper to see who exemplifies the traits they are discussing. She also asks them to identify a character's laws of life when they read short stories. Students refer to Templeton's books, *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations*, and bound booklets of winning essays to get ideas for their essays. Some students are inspired by reading

poetry and biographies of admirable individuals.

Principal Joe Guess believes that the Laws of Life program is a good way to get students to think. It "causes them to think, write, explore life, and look at the positive and negative consequences of the actions that they take."

Writing

When the program was first implemented, Jim Stewart, assistant principal, met with teachers in the English department and encouraged all of them to participate. He helped them see how it would fit in with the curriculum requirements for writing instruction. Many were at first reluctant because they viewed Laws of Life as just one more demand on their time, but most now see the value and willingly incorporate it. Jim feels that teachers understand what students still need to learn about writing as they read their essays.

Each teacher approaches the essay assignment differently. Some give little or no preparation, whereas others implement the steps in the writing process and encourage students to find their voices as they write. Darnell's twelfth graders, already familiar with the writing process, read their papers to each other and get reactions. Some volunteer to read their essays to the entire class. After two or three days of introduction, the students work on their own outside of school. They bring their assignments to class on appointed days, however, to share in groups.

Debbie correlates the Laws of Life essay with a state

writing assessment. She begins the year by having her students write paragraphs, which are then expanded into essays, and she encourages them to write about what they know. Clustering is a major feature of Debbie's writing program. She invites students to brainstorm ideas that relate to a law of life and organize them into clusters, a much easier procedure for the students than outlining. Students read their rough drafts to buddies, then let Debbie read them, before completing their essays.

Approaching the writing somewhat differently, Janice asks her tenth graders to turn in a thesis statement of a few sentences in three days. During this period, she guides and encourages the students in preparation for their writing. She then asks for three supporting paragraphs; for instance, if family values is the focus of the thesis, three related ideas might be financial, emotional, and spiritual support. As the students begin writing, Janice calls them to her, one by one, for quick conferences to see if they are on the right track. She wants to check their progress throughout so that she can feel certain that they are doing their own work. Students read each others' drafts, checking for content, logic, and errors in mechanics. Although hesitant to share at first, most students willingly read their drafts, unless they are so personal that they are only shared with the teacher. Janice then reads the drafts and, without further direction, allows the students to finish their essays.

One of the greatest difficulties students face is getting

started. Teachers try to help students find their stories by asking them questions about meaningful experiences. One student who claimed to have nothing to say was prompted by the teacher to recall the emotion he felt as he watched a Special Olympics contest. Others remember family stories that made a difference in their lives. Heather Hubbard, an eleventh grader, said that it became easier for her to write each year, especially when she began writing down ideas as they occurred to her for use in next year's essay.

Katie King, a twelfth grader and three-time winner, found one theme through her experiences with her severely retarded brother, which was to "make the most of life with a positive attitude." Dismayed by the immorality she so often saw on television, Katie chose for another essay the theme of *peace* "to find solace in today's society." She then used PEACE as an acronym for identifying five personal laws of life: *P*erseverance, *E*ncouragement, positive *A*ttitude, *C*ourage, and *E*nthusiasm. Her third essay, "The Joy of Giving," was inspired by a poem by Helen Steiner Rice. In it Katie says, "The joy of giving gives me a feeling of warmth that courses through me whenever I give of myself to others. Whether it is giving of my time, offering a helping hand, sharing my efforts, or giving a gift, the feeling is always there." Katie credits the program with giving her a chance to think about what she believes in and where she stands on certain issues.

As teachers prepare students for writing, most encourage

them to draw on their personal experiences, particularly those involving family members. Ivy Leigh Greene writes, "Through my experiences growing up, I have found that a person's character is not shaped by an individual person or event, but by numerous experiences and people in one's life. My family has made many positive contributions, and I can see a part of each of them in myself."

Winning essays seem to have certain characteristics. Some are liberally sprinkled with quotations from such prominent people as Churchill, Mark Twain, Hippocrates, and Shakespeare. The essays are often drawn from family experiences, with grandparents playing important roles in forming students' beliefs. Many writers choose themes relating to love, spirituality, and friendship. "If honesty does not exist between two friends, they are not true friends," writes Chris Marlowe. "Honesty is the foundation for friendship."

Evaluation of the Program

Clearly, the Laws of Life program offers many benefits, primarily the opportunity for students to think about, put into words, and communicate those principles and values that are important to them. They have the encouragement and opportunity to find their voices. Teachers notice improvement in writing skills and the ability to express ideas. The students themselves admit that the essay contest has changed them. When discouraged by a losing basketball game and ready to quit mid-season, Heather remembers persistence and hard work, two Laws of Life she

believes in, and continues to work for her team.

Jim Stewart can cite any number of success stories. J.J., who was tempted to drop out of school, graduated from high school because being a winner built his self confidence. Students who formerly would meet head-on in hallways and challenge each other to a fight are more likely now to say, "Excuse me" and step aside. Jim believes there are fewer discipline problems and that "the program has contributed to creating a school environment that reflects the Laws of Life."

Both Jim Stewart and Joe Guess agree that teachers are closer to their students and more compassionate toward them than they used to be. Joe also believes that a new program introduced by Karen Stockton, ninth grade teacher, is a direct result of Laws of Life. Building on students' newly-found abilities to express their thoughts and feelings, Karen has an "evening of poetry" so that parents can hear their children read their poems.

In homes where students discuss their work with their parents, the Laws of Life program enables family members to open up and freely exchange ideas. This openness has frequently resulted in improved family relationships, particularly in the case of a girl who let her stepfather know how much he meant to her. In many cases parents come to know their children as they share significant experiences and personal beliefs.

As some of the program participants, including Director Becky Templeton, talked with me around a table, we discussed some of the problems and unresolved issues. We considered the

possibility of extending the program into the elementary schools and agreed that this is the time when children need to begin thinking about their values, but some felt that these children might not have enough life experiences to draw on and might be unable to articulate their thoughts and feelings. Several of us felt that twice a year was too often to hold the contest since one was barely over before the next began. Becky also found that it was difficult to find qualified judges for each contest.

As with any program, it is more successful for some than for others. Some students give little thought to their essays, writing them hurriedly just to turn in their papers. Jim Stewart estimates that about half of the students open up with their ideas, whereas the other half simply write because the teacher requires them to do so. Many students are motivated by the monetary awards, rather than by any desire to examine their thinking. One teacher suspects that positive attitudinal and behavioral effects may last only for the duration of the contest for some students.

Likewise, some teachers put little effort into preparing students to write the essays, simply making assignments and letting students proceed on their own. There is no inservice to prepare teachers for implementing the program, and teachers emphasize different content, perhaps favoring family stories or certain values. There is no consistency, therefore, in teaching procedures or teacher expectations. I see the need for staff development, coordination, a leader who can spark enthusiasm, and

more curriculum integration of reading, writing, and thinking. This program could then become a focus of the curriculum.

Finding more ways to link reading to writing so that reading informs the writing would likely strengthen the program. Biographies of famous people, admirable heroes and heroines in literature, and essays by great thinkers are sources for helping students determine those character traits and values they most admire. The teachers who talked with me admitted that most students did little or no reading prior to writing their essays.

Parental involvement is generally beneficial, but teachers fear that some parents may take too active a role in preparing the essay. On the other hand, some students may receive no help. One teacher suggests that all writing be done in the classroom in order to control the amount of parent intervention, and another teacher requires students to pledge that they will not receive excessive help.

Regardless of these concerns, the Laws of Life program is enthusiastically endorsed by school personnel, parents of participants, and the community. By encouraging thoughtful self-expression through writing, it has the potential for enabling students to build better lives and to become more productive, clearer thinking citizens. The program's basic tenets relate directly to current theory about the need for connecting thinking with reading and writing to maintain a free society.

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Note: This program with related materials is available for other schools to adopt. For information on how your school can become part of the Laws of Life program, write to the John Templeton Foundation, Three Radnor Corporate Center, Suite 230, 100 Matsonford Road, Radnor, PA 19087.

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